Mary Johnston Talks

By HARRIOT T. COOKE.

"JUST thinking aloud," is Mary Johnston's characterization of her new book, *Michael Forth*, which is being brought out by Harper & Brothers. "In these days of world upheaval it is futile to attempt to cling to the old methods of the novelist. Writers and thinkers must break away from worn out conventions and try to salvage broken ideals, or to evolve new ones, from the wreckage the war has left us.

"No, my new book is not a war novel." Miss Johnston sat in a huge armchair in the study of her Virginia home, gowned in soft heliotrope silk which lent charm to her small, rounded figure. She was pushing back tendrils of her hair, just touched with white. "No, I hate war. I am a pacifist. There has never been a war that was not a useless waste of blood and treasure and that could not have easily been prevented."

"But your books *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing* were war novels."

"Yes, I have written about war; when I was younger I even believed in the romance of war, but I will never write of it again. Ah! how I hate everything connected with war," she shuddered. "In future my books will be sociological, philosophical, perhaps hardly connected narratives, just thinking aloud," she said, repeating the phrase, "like my book just finished, *Michael Forth*, which has little plot or incident.

"How can I describe scenes and people I have never seen? Look around this room and you will see." Book shelves extended from floor to ceiling. On the carved mahogany writing table lay the latest works on philosophy, history, sociology and spiritualism.

"I am not a genius, but I have talent and imagination and I know how to absorb. When one has browsed through about a hundred volumes about a particular period it is as easy to write of that time as of one's own. When I wrote *To Have and To Hold* I felt myself as much a part of those Colonial days as I do of the present —perhaps more. When I wrote my novels of the civil war I lived the war; perhaps that is the reason I have visualized the horrors of the last war so much; perhaps that is why I am a pacifist."

Politics came up.

"I must admit that I rarely read the President's speeches any more. I always think when one has read a certain amount about people one learns their types of mind and can tell pretty well what they are likely to say on any given subject. I think I know what Mr. Wilson will probably say about most things—also what Lodge and Borah and the others will say. It takes no very clever person to do that. As for politics, I am not a partisan. I am neither a Republican nor a Democrat. There are things about both parties I like and dislike. I admire the President, but I am not a hero worshipper. I could wish that he did things differently sometimes—that he were more radical. But when I look around among the men we have to choose from I see no man so well fitted to be at the helm. I am inclined to agree with a popular magazine writer who has recently characterized him as a great man with great faults.

"No, I do not believe Virginia will ratify the woman suffrage amendment. It will be hard to bring the Southern conservative element into line on suffrage, but I believe the Federal amendment will pass without the Southern States. Woman suffrage must come, and soon, and the resistance of the old slave States will be powerless to prevent it."

Three Hills, the country home of Mary Johnston, lies in the heart of the Alleghany Mountains, between Hot Springs and Warm Springs, Virginia. The traditional character of a Colonial home has been carried out in the broad hallway running from one end of the house to the other, flanked by rooms with polished mahogany highboys and sofas, a grandfather's clock of Revolutionary period, Chippendale chairs and Heppelwhite tables, a dining room in Sheraton, carpeted floors, with Persian rugs, latticed built in book cases and everywhere great blue Chinese bowls filled wth deftly arranged flowers. From the French windows of the dining room, framed in chintz draperies, the three hills which give the place its name lie in the distance, the purple shadows softening the rich green of the thick foliage, the white clouds lazily drifting over them with the sleepy charm native to the Virginia mountains.

The garden has brick walks winding in and out among rows of marigolds and zinnias, hollyhocks and china asters, bachelor's buttons, cockscombs, wallflowers and other old fashioned blossoms growing outside her study door.

"All this is Eloise's work. She spares me all details of housekeeping and financial matters, so that I may be free to write. Eloise is my man of business and I could do nothing without her." Just then Miss Johnston's sister made her appearance, her arms filled with freshly cut ears of green corn. She led us to a nearby hollow, where rows of kettles were hung across a huge, rough log lying horizontally in forked branches. Underneath were piled masses of brushwood.

"We are going to have a corn boiling party to-night by the light of the moon," she explained. "We have several good voices among our guests and we are going to sing and tell ghost stories and eat corn and have a good old fashioned time."

Lord Dunsany, playwright, lately of the Inniskilling Fusiliers and wounded, will revisit this country next month.

SUPPLEMENTING the questions and answers of Robert W. Chambers in the September *Bookman* we are in possession of the following:

"Before there is a 'democracy of reading,'"—Mr. Chambers is speaking—"there must be a democracy of education. . . . America can be made only what it makes itself; but its capacity is unlimited. If to-day it is 100 per cent. a movie nation it can become a 100 per cent. reading nation, and I think it will become so. I would prescribe for the average man or woman one book a month—autobiographical. . . . *The Undefeated*, by Snaith, and *The Duchess of Siona*, by Ernest Goodwin, are good examples of realism and romanticism. Both are splendid. It makes no difference what readers read as long as it is the best of its species."

WE ignored the centenary of Herman Melville and we shall let slip by in charitable silence the centenary of George Eliot. But the 400th anniversary of the first circumnavigation of the globe by Magellan in 1519-1522 has an effect on our imagination; particularly with air flights over the Atlantic in 1919. We could reread with absorption Pigafetta's journal of Magellan's troubles.

NEARLY all poets walk the floor, but Francis Carlin is the only poet who has made floorwalking a profession. He did it so well that he won a promotion to the rug department at Macy's, but some people are never satisfied. If you had seen him in the early summer you would have found him preparing to die, but now he writes:

"When I left Macy's I thought I was going West, like Kit Morley's old trousers. However, after a summer spent with the gowns on Fifth avenue and the grass in Central Park, I have changed my mind and shall continue to send love rhymes to the editors, some of whom I believe are ladies."

WITH Booth Tarkington, Margaret Deland and Sophie Kerr recorded the summer census of Kennebunkport is still incomplete.

"Cake Upon the Waters"

ZOE AKINS has succeeded in wrapping one of the heaviest and most complex facts of life in a piece of fiction as light as a feather. *Cake Upon the Waters* is perhaps the cleverest thing she has done yet. The thistle down wrapping is peculiarly Miss Akins's own, but the heavy problem concealed within belongs to all of us, being the terrible effect of money on its victims. "People who have money care so much more for it than people who have none," Miss Akins says, and proves it by the case of a beautiful young widow, Kitty Davenant, who was foolish and sweet and generous while she hadn't enough money to go around, but became sensible and mean and unlovely as soon as she fell into a fortune.

"Poor Kitty didn't know how wise a person must be to possess without complacence that which others desire and cannot achieve. She did not know that no man or woman can give carelessly, indifferently of that which he or she holds as precious. (We quote Miss Akins again.) That is, she didn't know it until there came a time when the fortune gave signs of slipping from her grasp. Then Kitty began to see herself as money had made her.

"When I'm too poor to save any money," she sighed, "I suppose I'll be a beautiful giver again."

Kitty has numerous beaus and is always doing something new and amusing. Hers is a fascinating personality in the hands of an author who has learned the art of making the most of such blessings and who has also, from recent experience with plays and scenarios, learned how to make things follow one another in correct and rapid style.

You will never know when you see Kitty levelling a pistol at an evident burglar on the cover of the book just what she is trying to make him do. And yet you might guess. She is making him promise to go down to her farm in Virginia and take care of her horses. A novel way of engaging servants, it would seem, and almost infallible, but it doesn't always work. We had a friend who considered herself fortunate in having a thieving servant last winter. She exacted a written confession and lay back for a few months' rest. It did no good. The maid's span was but the usual few weeks and it was probably the same with Mrs. Kitty's burglar. Even with the penitentiary yawning in their faces they manage to slip from our grasp.

It is impossible to say any more about *Cake Upon the Waters* because so much of it is plot that we would uncover it at every turn. The story is well conceived, well named and well executed, and these are surely the three requisites.

CAKE UPON THE WATERS. By Zoe Akins. Century Company.